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ABSTRACT

Project Partnership was designed to promote parent/professional collaboration in the education of young handicapped children. The project intended to have positive impacts on the home and on the teachers, who are asked to allow for greater communication between the school and home by redefining their roles. The project's approaches include team training, parent leaders, minigrants, coteaching, and practical strategies for parent involvement. Parent leaders, who focus on acting as liaisons to other parents, receive a small stipend and course credit. Evaluation findings pointed out a higher percentage for contact between teacher and parent about instruction in project families than in control families, who engaged in the most contact concerning administrative issues. Dilemmas facing the project, including assumptions about parental incompetence and increased demands on teachers, are touched upon. (CL)

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PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

A Partnership Model

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Parents and Schools: A Partnership Model

Project Partnership has been funded by the Massachusetts State Department of Education for three years with Federal 94-142 funds. The objectives of the Project are to promote parent/professional collaboration in the education of young special needs children and to encourage more parent-teacher communication around substantive educational issues. During Year One of the grant, Project Partnership was implemented in three pilot sites serving families from a suburban working class community (Total N = 37). Two of these sites are self-contained special needs classrooms (n = 24) and the third is a mainstreamed Head Start Program (n = 13). During this past school year, Year Two of the grant, the project has expanded to include an additional eleven sites in neighboring communities. These sites are a combination of special needs self-contained classrooms, integrated preschools, private preschools and a second mainstreamed Head Start program. These classrooms serve predominantly working class families, though the private preschools cater also to professional families. In one year we have grown from the initial 37 families to include a total of over 500 families. The projected goal for Year Three is statewide dissemination of the several Partnership models in both special needs and integrated settings.

Theoretical Framework

In developing the model for Project Partnership we have made two sets of assumptions. The first set of assumptions revolves around participants or recipients of the program: children, parents and teachers. The literature on parent participation in education reveals that parent involvement in preschool education can result in higher school achievement for children, especially young handicapped children. Programs which involve training and assistance for the parents of high risk children produce significant and long lasting results in school performance and I.Q. scores (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). We believe that all children benefit when parents join teachers in encouraging intellectual growth; we believe that the special needs child benefits even more (Kearsley, 1979).

Involvement in their child's education can have positive effects on parents as well. It can enhance personal growth in parents and often generalizes to many aspects of their lives (Salisbury, 1980). Despite the growth of parent programs in recent years, there is still a vast asymmetry between parents and professionals with professionals frequently believing they "know best" in many areas, especially in the area of educational programming (Gliedman & Roth, 1980). The opportunity to communicate more with teachers about the child's education and the opportunity to work directly with the child on skill building and around educational issues does much to right this asymmetry (e.g., Gittell, 1978). Working with the child and becoming more familiar with educational jargon enhances the parent role and instigates a feeling of parental competence, a step in the direction of an equilateral relationship between parent and professional. Gaining a sense of efficacy with regard to their child's development is especially important to parents of special needs children who may have additional feelings of inadequacy or helplessness with which to contend (Kearsley, 1979; O'Leary, 1980; Seligman, 1975)

Many parent programs seek to make home and family information more available to the professional in order to have an impact only on the parent and the child. In contrast, Project Partnership seeks change in both the home and school and assumes that teachers too will benefit from collaborating with parents. In this model, teachers have the opportunity to receive and utilize parent contributions and information. They learn more about how the child functions in a variety of settings and about parent goals for children. They learn to open up their classrooms more to parents -- to demystify the school and educational jargon. The child is, of course, the ultimate beneficiary of any changes effected in both parents and teachers by their efforts to work together.

The second set of assumptions behind Project Partnership concerns program delivery, specifically the importance of local control of the program and the appropriate approach for those designing and implementing such a program. With Public Law 94-142,

schools are federally mandated to promote parent involvement in educational planning and decision making, yet there has been little change in the direction of actual power-sharing (Goldstein et al., 1980; Yoshida et al., 1978). Programs that are mandated by government agencies and managed by professionals often lack broad-based support. Because locally initiated or maintained programs are better able to both reflect the diversity in a community and to respond to specific needs of individuals, they are often more successful (e.g., Davies, 1978). Consequently, changes in decision making, power-sharing and role definition for parents and professionals take place most effectively at the grass roots, classroom level. We rely on teachers, parents and, in an indirect way, administrators to realize their stake in these changes and to opt for the strategies that we offer.

Teachers are central to the success of any program that seeks to promote communication and consistency between the home and school. Without question, the program needs the support of school administrators. Ideally, school administrators should be accessible to parents, should view parent activities as a priority and should incorporate this priority into the evaluation and accountability procedures for teachers. However, the teachers make the decisions in their own classrooms and it is at the classroom level that change is most necessary and ultimately most effective. As with federal mandates, requirements imposed by administrators are implemented only superficially unless on-site teachers subscribe to them and invest in them. Project Partnership's task is to provide opportunities for teachers to re-define their roles so as to allow for more communication between the home and school, focus this communication on educational issues and teach parents "the ropes" in the system. The exact nature of this redefinition is left up to the teachers who are in control in their own classrooms.

Ownership for programming and change is basic to Project Partnership. Change is not imposed on parents and teachers; it is created by them and speaks directly to the needs identified by them. Most parents are concerned about their own child and are interested in being involved in programs and changes tied directly to their child (Gittell, 1978). It is easier to get parent support for activities implemented at the classroom level than at a system-wide level. Certain parent roles, for example parents sitting on advisory councils or advocating for general issues, meet the needs of professionals wishing to satisfy mandates and not necessarily the needs of parents. Project Partnership recognizes the difference in these approaches and attempts to get parents to "buy into" the project at the levels that are most meaningful to them, their child and their child's classroom. Even within Partnership classrooms parents are given options by teachers and Partnership staff for the form of involvement that best suits them.

Administrators of a program like Project Partnership quickly learn to yield to teachers and parents in much of the decision making over implementation in particular sites. The presence of the project and one or two crusaders for parent involvement are the stimuli that can bring teachers and parents together. It is this reinforcement and resource upon which our many programs rely. A lot of our ideas are from books already dusty on library shelves. We clean the ideas up, bring them to light and then provide incentives for people to use them. We also monitor, problem solve, evaluate and especially praise people for their efforts. Many teachers report feeling unappreciated and isolated in their classrooms. For them, the very presence of an attentive and responsive project staff is inspiring. Our strategy is to walk softly and provide many incentives for people who choose to follow us.

Techniques

Project Partnership is not a distinct model. Rather, it is an approach whose key components include: team training; Parent Coordinators or leaders; mini-grants; co-teaching; and practical strategies for parent involvement. We begin with our team training, a series of workshops for parents, teachers and administrators that addresses skills in communication and strategies for home-school collaboration. The workshop series is accredited through a local college for up to six graduate or undergraduate credits. Teams from each participating program representing parents, teachers and administrators are recruited to receive this training and assume positions of leadership in parent-staff cooperation. Topics include the parent role in the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) process, the impact of the special needs child on the home and school, parents as co-teachers, classroom observation, parent-teacher conferences and an array of discrete techniques for parent involvement. We might add that initially we had grandiose ideas about the kinds of parent involvement strategies we would stress, such as parents and teachers planning curriculum together. But the more we worked in classrooms, the more we realized that we needed to begin by merely increasing the flow of communication between the home and school. If the end goal is parental decision making in education, first steps necessarily include getting to know each other, increasing contact, learning that schools are not only the teacher's province and that much is to be gained by utilizing parents as resources and collaborators. Our course is an opportunity for parents and professionals to "rub elbows" -- an indirect, yet effective way to chip away at some of the negative or erroneous assumptions parents and teachers make about one another.

Many parent programs concentrate on attitude change through teaching communication and process skills. Project Partnership seeks to do this too but primarily in the context of practical strategies and behavioral change. We work from the premise

that situational change and changes in behavior are often followed by attitude change (rather than the reverse). Attitude change that is not context-bound is difficult to sustain and often creates too much dependency and too much of a clinical, therapeutic atmosphere to effect. In the first year of Project Partnership we occasionally fell into this with our three pilot programs. As we expanded, the interpersonal focus became less pronounced and our role as teachers, consultants and "idea people" grew more effective.

At the core of Project Partnership is its reliance on a parent leader to bridge the gap between educators and parents. Each classroom selects its own Parent Coordinator who is then trained by Project Partnership in two steps: one is our series of workshops on parent-teacher collaboration and the other is a short orientation program which prepares the parent to work closely with more "school savvy" educators. For many parents it has been some years since they have been in a classroom setting. Consequently, our orientation program attempts to reacquaint parents with the classroom environment as well as to provide them with information crucial to their activities as Parent Coordinator. Tips on how to run a meeting, on how the "system" works, and on how to traverse the labyrinth of special education laws form part of this information package. This brief course also stresses the skills parents already have but are not inclined to recognize, particularly managing their household and knowing their child.

In addition to the orientation and the seminar course, parent leaders in Project Partnership function as liaisons to the other parents, help organize and schedule parent-teacher activities, organize and conduct parent groups and provide guided observations of the classroom. In our special needs programs Parent Coordinators are involved in co-leading groups with teachers on effective parenting and living with a special needs child, as well as providing advocacy support at Team Evaluations. These activities, though comprehensive in impact, require only a five-hour-a-week time commitment on the part of our parent leaders.

In order to free parent leaders to work with us, we provide a small stipend which helps defray babysitting and transportation fees, and gives parents a sense that we value their time. Many parents feel devalued by the demands made on them for volunteer activities. We believe that a stipend and course credit does much to enhance the parent role and promote their cooperation and motivation (Kagan & Schraft, 1980). Another incentive is for parents to see their own child make progress. One way we seek to provide this is by emphasizing the parent as co-teacher component of Partnership. Through this collaboration children can quickly benefit from parent involvement and parents can feel more confident and in control and can take a knowledgeable role in educational planning and decision making. We encourage this across the board, but especially in our special needs programs.

Perhaps the most successful and far-reaching component of our program, however, has been our mini-grants. As a final project in our workshop series each team writes a mini-proposal for beginning or further developing a parent program in their own settings. Project Partnership then funds worthwhile proposals for a maximum of \$400 per program. Worthwhile proposals are those that utilize the parent leader and build into the curriculum opportunities for parent-staff communication and cooperation. Much outreach to parents depends upon teachers and parents extending their day and working "gratis." Instead, Project Partnership helps develop proposals that build change into the regular school day and also provide credit and a small amount of money for people's time and effort. Our use of \$4000 to fund 11 programs affecting 500 families is cost efficient and especially welcome in these days of fiscal belt-tightening. One surprise in the proposal writing was that several programs were hard pressed to find ways to spend the money. Perhaps this is because in our training and direct work with programs we have developed strategies for home-school cooperation that require no

additional funding. We concentrate on shifting priorities, re-working curriculum and utilizing readily available materials for implementing change. Our curriculum is not fancy or revolutionary, it is thoughtful and utilizes available people and resources.

What are these fool-proof strategies to which we have been referring? They are many and vary from program to program. Some of our programs have never made outreach to parents. Thus small changes such as a "sixty-second phone call" -- a brief call from the teacher at regular intervals -- or once a month progress reports are a big step. Other programs came to us with a well developed parent component and use their affiliation with Project Partnership as an opportunity to offer, for instance, a teacher-parent course on living with the special needs child or a series of workshops on effective parenting co-led by a parent and teacher. Guided classroom observations, parents teaching in the classroom or the home on a regular basis, parent libraries and substitutes to free teachers to meet more regularly with parents are yet other options some of our programs employ. Some teachers, however, find too much parent involvement threatening and feel more comfortable with home-school notebooks that allow for a daily or weekly written exchange between the home and school, whereas others are confident enough to open wide their classroom doors, a policy that usually prompts frequent school visits by parents.

Project Partnership is designed to respect individual differences and to value the change and effort we see on the part of even the most closed and traditional educators (or parents!). By offering a flexible model in the direction of substantial change in the relationship between home and school, we make a good first-step towards altering the dynamics that interfere with parent/professional collaboration.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the first year of Project Partnership, conducted by an independent evaluation team, was composed of three parts: a formative evaluation, designed to maximize ongoing program efforts; a process evaluation, designed to determine the extent of implementation of the program; and a summative evaluation, designed to examine the workshop component.

Data for the formative evaluation consisted of interviews conducted with parents, teachers and administrators during the beginning and end of the first year. Four broad categories of questions were asked: knowledge of the program's goals; views of both the ideal and current relationship between parents and teachers; perspectives on the parents' role in providing instruction to their child; and impressions of the problems and pitfalls of the program. These data were used primarily to improve the functioning of the program, but they produced a few surprises which are worth a brief discussion for those interested in implementing a similar program.

First, during the initial phases of the program, many parents did not recognize the collaborative emphasis of Partnership. One parent described the goal of the program as, "wanting mothers go go into the classroom two or three times a week" and another commented, "they are trying to tell you how to improve your child." Even after the program had been in operation for several months, some parents expressed concern about "bothering" teachers. Getting a sense of teamwork across to both parents and teachers took a great deal of time.

Second, although at the beginning of the program no parents reported that they provided direct instruction to their child at home, other than reading a book or purchasing coloring books, by the end of the first year all parents described activities which they routinely did with their child and which were an extension of classroom activities. Parents consistently pointed out, however, that they wanted teachers to provide them with specific instructions about these activities -- they did not just

want a game or workbook sent home. They also wanted teachers to help them become aware of their child's readiness for a more advanced task. From the parents' point of view, a great deal of communication about home instruction needs to occur between parents and teachers if this goal is to be realized.

Third, parents and teachers were frequently surprised at the ease at which children accepted their parents in the classroom. In the early phases of the program, both parents and teachers talked about their fear of children "acting out" when a parent visited the class. This type of behavior, however, rarely happened.

Fourth, parents and teachers unanimously agreed that Parent Coordinators are vital to the success of this program. They regarded these individuals as paraprofessionals who took their role seriously. Many attributed this seriousness to the stipend associated with the position. An interesting footnote is that Parent Coordinators reported dramatic changes in self-perception at the end of the first year. Each spoke of acquiring career-directions and specific skills, such as organizing an agenda or running a meeting.

The process evaluation was conducted to determine if contact between parents and teachers in the Partnership classrooms varied in frequency and quality from that in similar classrooms for special needs youngsters. Control classrooms were selected from a waiting list of those wishing to join the Partnership program. Contact records -- reports of all contacts made between parents and teachers -- were designed with the aid of teachers so they could be used for both evaluation purposes and teachers' personal record-keeping. Teachers were trained in recording so that reporting across classroom would be reliable. These records were kept for a selected ten-week period during the spring semester.

The following information was recorded on the contact records: 1) who initiated the contact (parent or teacher); 2) the approximate duration of the contact; 3) the type (phone call, note, school visit, home visit, general meeting); and 4) the content (a brief written description). The content was later coded according to the following categories by a rater blind to group membership: 1) administrative information; 2) placement decision; 3) class observation; 4) methods of instructing student; 5) progress report; 6) field trip; 7) classroom volunteer; 8) social; and 9) health concerns.

Quantitative analyses of the parent-teacher contacts for a ten-week period indicated that the mean number of contacts per family differed significantly for those enrolled in the Partnership and in the control classrooms ($\bar{x} = 10.62$, $\bar{x} = 4.1$, respectively; $t = 3.25$, $p < .01$). One particularly interesting finding was that parents in the Partnership classrooms initiated 53 percent of the contacts between teachers and themselves whereas parents of students enrolled in the control classrooms initiated only 34 percent of the contacts. This suggests that the Partnership program may be associated with an alteration in the traditional pattern of asymmetry of communication between teachers and parents.

Although these findings are based on a small sample (24 families enrolled in Partnership; 24 control families; $N = 48$), the data suggest important differences between the Partnership and the control classrooms. The most frequent type of contact (35.7 percent) between parents and teachers in the Partnership classrooms occurred for discussions about methods of instructing a student, whereas most contacts in the control classrooms (52.3 percent) consisted of administrative issues, such as information about a field trip or changes in transportation arrangements. In fact, in the control classrooms very few discussions (10.2 percent) between parents and teachers involved instructional themes. One other interesting note. The most frequent form of contact in the Partnership classes was the school visit (62.0 percent) whereas this was the least preferred form (9.1 percent) in the control

classrooms. This difference is striking, especially considering that parents of children in the Partnership classes lived no closer to the school than did those of children in the control classrooms. This suggests that parents were receptive to the "open-door" policy encouraged by most Partnership teachers.

A summative evaluation was performed for the workshop component of the Partnership program. At the end of each workshop, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form, and at the end of the year, they were asked to fill out a form comparing the workshops. Responses to the workshops in general were quite positive. Members of all three communities -- parents, teachers and administrators -- reported that they were pleased with the opportunity to gain mutual respect and thought they had benefited from the team approach offered:

"I think it really helped us to get to know all sides of each other -- that teachers, parents and administrators are human too -- capable of having bad days, good ones, ups and downs -- that none of us can accomplish this project alone, but as a team we can accomplish many things together." (A Parent)

"Many of the parents I have worked with this year have said that this approach helped reduce their anxiety about their children, themselves and school. They wanted to build a trusting relationship first, to establish proof that we all were on the child's side." (A Teacher)

In particular, participants noted that the relaxed and informal atmosphere created by the Partnership staff encouraged attendance.

The four workshops that were considered most valuable by participants included both communication skills and practical strategies for parent-teacher collaboration. Two workshops were rated outstanding by the majority of participants. One addressed the resistance to change that frequently occurs in school settings and ways of overcoming this resistance. In the other, parents and teachers discussed the impact of the special needs child on the home and school. The workshops on the parent role in

educational planning and techniques for parent involvement -- classroom observations and parents as co-teachers -- were also quite popular. Participants praised the combination of practical strategies and theoretical information that the workshops offered.

Reflections

The evaluation of Project Partnership provided specific information about the success of the program and about the ways in which the program could be improved. But another type of information was also acquired during the experiences of the first year of this program. Those who develop and evaluate programs, such as Partnership, aimed at increasing the involvement of parents of handicapped youngsters in the public schools, face a series of dilemmas. We will briefly outline the major dilemmas we wrestled with during the past year, as we believe it will be instructive to those who plan similar programs.

First, what is a program, like Partnership, saying to parents? Parent participation programs often carry a hidden message about the deficits of parents. When translated, this message becomes, "you're the problem. If you raised your children right they wouldn't need all this extra help. Now you need to be taught. Here are some professionals to help you." Even the most well meaning and sensitive professionals may project assumptions about parental incompetence.

A second message often given to parents is that parent participation is not only right, but also a responsibility. Such a message can infuse guilt into parents by demanding that they "owe it to their child" to become involved in this type of program. Some parents of handicapped youngsters are already over-burdened with the stresses of raising a child with so many needs and they would like to avoid adding more meetings and appointments to their hectic schedules. Also, parents can easily misinterpret this message assuming that if they get involved in a program such as Partnership, their child will automatically "get better." They may develop expectations which no program, no matter how successful, can hope to meet.

A third message parent participation programs often give parents is the need to advocate for their child, even when parents are quite pleased with the instruction their child is receiving. This advocacy is in some cases, unnecessary and in others, insufficient. Sometimes parents are dupped into thinking they are advocating when in fact a decision has already been made or they have not been told enough about the decision to provide the necessary information to support their case. On the one hand, parents are asked to advocate when they do not really want to and on the other hand, they are not taken seriously when they do.

A different set of dilemmas involve the role of professionals in a parent participation project. We have learned that there are many ways in which teachers can help parents. They can provide a road map to the school system; locate resources for a child and demonstrate instructional activities that can be implemented at home. They can also translate educational jargon; explain the theory behind a particular curriculum; discuss the state of the art of diagnostic assessment; and encourage parents to develop self-confidence in recognizing the educational needs of their child. But, teachers cannot do everything; they need to recognize the boundaries of their expertise in interactions with parents. We found that once parents became more involved in the classroom and had more interactions with teachers, some teachers felt it necessary to make a leap to a clinical role, either by attempting to provide parents with some form of therapy or by evaluating home dynamics according to personal values. As a result teachers remained on their pedestal and failed to learn information from parents which could help them improve classroom instruction for individual children. This short-circuiting of two way communication undercuts the collaborative approach which is a critical aspect of the Partnership philosophy.

Another type of problem can occur for teachers. As parents increase their knowledge about the classroom and about the instructional program designed for their child, they may place certain demands upon teachers. Some of these demands may be easy for

teachers to meet, but others may compete with those placed on them by the administration. Teachers may feel that they are being asked to do too much by too many, and they may lose sight of the benefits of parent participation.

Wrestling with these various dilemmas has made us aware that neither subscribing to a flexible model nor developing a series of special techniques guarantees that a particular program will improve parent-teacher collaboration. We have found, however, that when program developers pay attention to the way a program is delivered so that hidden messages are not given to parents and added burdens are not placed on teachers, parents and teachers can come together to work as a team to improve the parents' understanding of the classroom, the teachers' understanding of the parents' goals for their child, and in the end, we believe, the educational experience for the handicapped youngster.

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